



Photography Kenneth Theysen

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS — By Joanna Fox

➤ *To open a restaurant away from the beaches, hotels, and resorts of a place like Aruba takes a great location, a lot of guts, and plenty of experience.*

For Luc Beerepoot, who opened his first incredibly successful restaurant, Barefoot, in 2010, the idea of opening up a new place in an historic Aruban home was an opportunity that he could not pass up. Charismatic, soft spoken, and the perfect host, Beerepoot makes this extremely competitive and stressful industry seem like second nature. In reality it truly is, as Beerepoot has been doing it for most of his life.

Beerepoot studied the hotel and catering industry at college in The Netherlands and travelled all over the world working in various hotels and resorts. *"I was in Switzerland,"* recalls Beerepoot, *"and the hotel didn't do what they promised me. So I thought, you know what, I've seen snow and I've seen mountains, now lets get some sun and do some diving."*

Beerepoot came to Aruba, met a girl (who is now his wife), and after two years on the island both of them decided to move on to new adventures. Despite the other opportunities that came their way as they travelled and worked in Ireland and Colorado, there was something about Aruba that made them want to come back and settle down.

For a couple in the hospitality industry, settling down not only meant buying a house and starting a family. It also meant an opportunity to finally realize their dream of having their own restaurant. Barefoot

opened in 2010 and was an immediate success. With its beachside location and incredible views of not only the sunset, but incoming planes as they glide over the ocean and cruise ships as they make their way out of the port, Barefoot really set the bar for combining a casual, beach atmosphere with high quality food and service.

Although Barefoot's initial success and continued prosperity made a name for Beerepoot and his business partner on the island, he couldn't help but notice this grand old house, a bit off the beaten track, that caught his eye each time he and his wife drove by.

"We'd been looking at this house for about 10 years, everyday driving by thinking this would be a nice spot for a restaurant. One day we drove past it and there was a little 'for sale' sign in the yard so we said hey, let's give it a shot."

The house had always been a mystery to Beerepoot. It was an old, large, colonial-looking place that he had to assume was built in 1918 due to a date engraved on the building itself. As he started to look deeper into the home's history and search through the island's archives, he learned that it had also been a makeshift hospital for patients to recuperate in while the island's first actual hospital was being built back in the 1920s. It also served as a home for the doctors. The idea of it being a landmark building only increased the appeal for Beerepoot



Dennis Hockstra – Chef



to open it up and share this wonderful historic space with everyone. *"We wanted to open it to the public and, well, we only know how to do restaurants so... Otherwise it would have been a museum. Plus, a restaurant is way more fun."*

The house not only came with a rich history, it also had its own name. The then-famous architect who designed it, Adriaan Lacléhad, had a daughter named Maria del Carmen. Since the building was originally built as a vacation home, and 'quinta' means house in Spanish, it was christened Quinta del Carmen. Beerepoot wanted to preserve as much as he could of the house's background, so it would only be fitting to call the restaurant by that same name.

"It wasn't a building that was built to be a restaurant, it was a building that was meant to be a home and you feel that difference. It's very homey and with all the big trees and the big garden, it's not a building that was built to make money. It was built to enjoy."

After four months of transforming the place from a home to a restaurant, Beerepoot managed to keep not only the original structure and layout, but all the charm and comfort of the place.

"For us, if you buy a building like this it would make no sense to knock it down. We made it work that we had to fit everything in and plan it around the original structure. It was more difficult. It's easier to start from scratch but it's nice to keep it the way that it is. As well, you have an obligation to the island. It's been around for almost 100 years, so it will be another 100 years. We want to preserve as much as we can for the next generations."

The food at Quinta del Carmen also reflects the atmosphere of the place by combining a contemporary-style cuisine with traditional

touches. *"We do international cuisine," explains Beerepoot. "So a little bit of everything, but we do have traditional Dutch recipes that we would have at our grandmother's house. With the historical building that it is, it's kind of comfort food that we don't have time to make anymore because everyone is too busy running around all the time, and that's what we're going back to."*

From the soft, yellow-painted façade, to the welcoming entranceway and bar, the candlelit tables in the garden, and the diners sitting back and relaxing in this magical setting, the whole place is enchanting. It's easy to see why Beerepoot was so taken not only by Quinta del Carmen, but the island of Aruba itself.

"This is just a beautiful island. You still need to work hard and do what every regular person does – the laundry and ironing and all those glorious things, but the time that you have off is very high in quality. And now we're starting a family and that's great. We have two daughters and they're always running around and playing about. It's fabulous for them. And they'll speak four or five languages by the time they're six years old, so yeah, that's amazing."

For Beerepoot, who has always worked and moved from place to place and country to country, he's now not only has made Aruba his own home, but he's restored Quinta del Carmen to create a home away from home for his customers too. And when Beerepoot greets his guests as they walk through that door, there is no doubt that this restaurant, and this island, are really where his heart is.